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The Background of the Gloucestershire Peace Rolls

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INTRODUCTION

I THE BACKGROUND OF THE GLOUCESTERSHIRE PEACE ROLLS

THE four peace rolls printed in this volume are scattered over the last forty years of the fourteenth century with varying intervals between them. Thus the political background of each roll is different. The earliest, covering the years 1361-1363, belongs to the eight or nine years of prosperity following the peace signed with France at Brétigni in 1361, and preceding the decline in the activity and vigour of Edward III. The roll of 1378 was drawn up in the first year of Richard II's reign. During the last years before his grandfather's death there had been increasing unrest and dissatisfaction with the government. The Commons, in spite of their efforts in the Good Parliament in 1376, had failed to establish control over the king's advisers and the expenditure of funds, or to achieve the much needed social reforms. Richard's long minority offered continued opportunity for factional quarrels, while his numerous uncles, of whom John of Gaunt was the most influential, were potential if not actual centres of trouble. The third roll belongs to the years between the great revolt of 1381 and Richard's assumption of power in 1389—the period of his constitutional rule—and the fourth, to the last years of his reign, when he had declared himself an absolute ruler, a step which led to his abdication in 1399.¹

¹ Full accounts of the narrative history of this period may be found in G. M. Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wycliffe* (new ed., reprinted, London, 1925); T. F. Tout, *Chapters in the Administrative History of Mediaeval England*, III, IV (*Publications of the University of Manchester, Historical Series*, XLVIII, XLIX, Manchester, 1928); K. H. Vickers, *England in the Later Middle Ages (A History of England in Seven Volumes*, ed. by C. W. C. Oman, III, London, 1913); T. F. Tout, *The History of England, from the Accession of Henry III to the Death of Edward III* (*The Political History of England*, ed. by W. Hunt and R. L. Poole, III, London, 1905); C. W. C. Oman, *The History of England, from the Accession of Richard II to the Death of Richard III* (*ibid.* IV, London, 1906).

Any account of Gloucestershire in the middle ages—as today—must begin with its triple division into forest, hill and vale.² While Gloucestershire was until the fifteenth century predominantly an agricultural shire, it had also developed both industrially and commercially. In the western section, between the Wye and the Severn, lay the Forest of Dean, a great royal forest containing large coal and iron deposits. Iron had been mined here since the Romans, and during the middle ages the region was England's chief source of supply for this commodity. On the east, the county included part of the Cotswold hills, which also extended into Oxfordshire and Berkshire. Here were raised the famous flocks that in the fifteenth century were known as Cotswold sheep, and in the fourteenth were supplying the wool that made Gloucestershire, together with the counties on the east and southeast, the largest cloth-producing centre in the kingdom. The manufacture of woollen cloth was carried on in many towns in the county.³ Between the hills and the forest lay the vale, through which flowed the Severn. In this section, the most fertile in the county, were situated Gloucester—the shire town—Bristol, many large religious houses, and Berkeley castle, the seat of the Berkeley family. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the lords of Berkeley took an active interest in agricultural progress, farming their demesne lands themselves.⁴ The Severn was of great importance in the development of Gloucestershire. In the middle ages it was famous for its fish, particularly lampreys and salmon; also it was the natural outlet for the wool and iron of the county and for the trade of such centres in the north as Coventry.

² *Victoria History of the County of Gloucester* (London, 1907), II, 127 ff, 215 ff.

³ H. L. Gray, "The Production and Exportation of English Woollens in the Fourteenth Century", *EHR*, 1924, XXXIX, 13-35; J. J. Simpson, "Wool Trade and the Woolmen of Gloucestershire," *BGAS* (Gloucester, 1931), LIII, 65 ff.

⁴ John Smyth, *The Lives of the Berkeleys*, ed. by Sir John MacLean (*BGAS*, Gloucester, 1883), I, 113 ff, 140 ff, 300. See also II, 5-6; R. E. Prothero, *English Farming Past and Present* (new ed., ed. by A. D. Hall, London, 1936), pp. 31-33, 44-46.

Bristol, situated on the Avon near its junction with the Severn on the southern border of the county, early became the most important port on the west coast. Thus due to topographical conditions the economic life of medieval Gloucestershire was as varied as that of any county in England.

Because these rolls are local records they do not to any large degree reflect the political struggles of the second half of the fourteenth century, the difficulties of the central government, or the defeat of the Commons' efforts to bring about reform. The disorganization at the end of Richard II's reign is illustrated by the failure of the king's bench to handle business arising out of the peace roll of 1395-1398.⁵ Unlike the rolls for some counties those for Gloucestershire, because they contain almost no economic offences, do not give anything approaching an adequate picture of economic or social conditions in the county. Although the west of England was little touched by the great revolt, still Gloucestershire's economic development was so advanced by this time that there must have been pressing questions of wages, prices and the like.⁶ Of these there is nothing. The problem of the salaries of priests, the extent of the manufacture of cloth, and the difficulty of forcing the large religious houses to obey the regulations on fishing, are suggested, though not pictured in full. On the other hand, the constant struggle against lawlessness that went on throughout the country is adequately portrayed. The protection of life and property was a serious problem in medieval Gloucestershire as elsewhere.

II THE PEACE ROLLS AND THE KING'S BENCH

The four peace rolls for Gloucestershire printed in this volume are today among the records in the Public Record Office, the three earlier ones being classified as Assize Rolls and the fourth among Ancient Indictments.⁷ They

⁵ *infra* p. 42.

⁶ For violations of the laws regulating the sale of commodities which appear on a king's bench roll of 1363 see *infra* p. 47.

⁷ Putnam, *Proceedings*, xvii-xviii, lxxv ff.